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FM AMEMBASSY ASTANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7157
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE 2319
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHZN/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1681
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2387
RHMFIS/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHINGTON DC
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHINGTON DC
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFAAA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNCS/NSC WASHDC 1876
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC 1726
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: A TALE OF TWO NORTHERN CITIES

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REFTELS: A. ASTANA 0010
 1B. 09 ASTANA 0959

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: On recent visits to Kostanai and North Kazakhstan Oblasts, PolOff visited American corners in Kostanai and Petropavlovsk. Local residents claimed their regions are "the most peaceful in Kazakhstan," and expressed optimism about their regions' futures, although infrastructure, especially in Petropavlovsk, appeared relatively unchanged since the Soviet era. Local residents requested more opportunities to travel to the United States on scholarship and exchange programs. They expressed concerns about Kazakhstan's relationship with China and the effect of possible WTO accession. END SUMMARY.

KOSTANAI TOUTS ITS CULTURAL LEGACY -- AND NEW INFRASTRUCTURE

13. (SBU) Several of PolOff's interlocutors in Kostanai, including American Corner event participants, Oblast Akimat (regional administration) representative Tatyana Zueva, and the director of one of the largest NGOs in Kostanai, Igor Vassilenko, praised their "safe, livable, and dynamic" city. Many residents, including Zueva and Vassilenko, noted with pride that they were born and raised in Kostanai. Near the modern airport, a large billboard welcomed investment and featured Canadian, Chinese, Israeli, and Russian flags. On the drive into town, Zueva pointed out several new residential districts and shopping malls. The town's center boasted extensive holiday decorations, including an ice castle and several large, lighted "Christmas trees." In spring, the Oblast purchases flowers from the nationwide conglomerate ZelenStroi to decorate the city and improve quality of life, Zueva said. She praised the city's commitment to a "green environment," noting a city law that requires the planting of two trees for every tree cut down.

14. (SBU) "Kostanai has been known as a center of arts since Soviet times," Zueva asserted, proudly emphasizing the Oblast's preservation of many historic buildings, including those housing a modern art academy and philharmonic. Zueva also led PolOff on a tour of the two-story, 600 square meter, government-subsidized local-artists gallery, which the Charge visited in May (ref B). The

first floor showcased works by well-known artists with Kostanai connections, the second exhibition room was devoted to young Kostanai artists, and a third gallery allowed Kostanai artist to exhibit works for sale. Various other residents commented on the high value Kostanai residents place on art and culture.

Representatives from the House of Friendship and NGO activists praised Post's May 2008 jazz event held in Kostanai, and urged the United States to support more cultural programming in Kostanai (ref B). House of Friendship exhibits praised the accomplishments of Kostanai youth.

¶15. (SBU) At the same time, Kostanai Oblast's official representative, Tatyana Zueva, insisted on showcasing the city's modern development. Zueva, a former music teacher and Soviet Young Pioneer leader, took PolOff to the newly constructed French House and two quirky restaurants, a faux castle and a trendy caf designed to look like a submarine. The five-year-old castle restaurant was almost deserted during the week-day lunch hour, despite the fact that prices were approximately half those of an average Astana restaurant. Young diners, on the other hand, filled the popular Nautilus cafe, where prices were 80% cheaper than in Astana.

MORE SOVIET INFRASTRUCTURE IN PETROPAVLOVSK

¶16. (SBU) In contrast to the situation in wealthier Kostanai, the main airport in the neighboring North Kazakhstan Oblast was small, old, and dimly lit, with no mechanized baggage carousel. In North Kazakhstan Oblast's capital city of Petropavlovsk, nondescript Soviet apartment complexes and administrative buildings filled the downtown, while traditional Siberian-style houses predominated in residential districts. A few elaborately-carved ancient wooden houses lined the main street. Unlike in Kazakhstan's large cities and new oil towns, large-scale new construction and skyscrapers were

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conspicuously absent in Petropavlovsk, and PolOff's hotel felt distinctly Soviet. The front-desk staff collected keys when guests left hotel premises, and large rooms were dimly lit. The recently-remodeled sauna and swimming pool complex remained shabby.

...BUT RESIDENTS PRAISE CITY FOR BEING SAFE AND QUIET

¶17. (SBU) Despite the lack of new buildings, local residents asserted their high satisfaction with Petropavlovsk's quality of life. PolOff's first interlocutor, an ethnic-Kazakh taxi driver and long-time Petropavlovsk resident, said that "he would never want to live anywhere else," since the city is safe and calm. The taxi driver's only complaint was occasional hoarding of gas at some stations in order to sell at peak prices. Laura Temenova, a long-time, ethnic-Kazakh resident and manager of the Petropavlovsk American Corner, praised her "quiet and safe" city, but alleged that the heating was turned on several weeks late this year, causing many schoolchildren to become sick.

RESIDENTS EAGER FOR EXCHANGES AND INTERESTED IN U.S. POLICIES

¶18. (SBU) At separate presentations at the American Corners in Kostanai and Petropavlovsk, PolOff answered questions from audiences that included over 50 North Kazakhstan and Kostanai State University students, several retirees, one journalist, and representatives from the regional administrations. They asked PolOff about her impressions of Kazakhstan, the role of an Embassy, the foreign-service application process, and opportunities to study in the United States. Of particular interest to the students was the economic crisis' affect on U.S. scholarship programs. Residents did not hesitate to ask about international politics and U.S. policies, questioning PolOff about World War II memorials in Georgia, per-hectare grain yields, U.S. farm subsidies, Obama's Nobel Prize, U.S. policies towards Iraq and Afghanistan, and the October U.S.-Kazakhstan Energy Partnership meetings. One participant further questioned the benefits of alternative energy cooperation for oil and gas-rich Kazakhstan. A particularly active contributor, Marat Yermukanov, a journalist in his late 50s, who works for North Kazakhstan's "Severniy" newspaper, said his daughter had studied in the United States, and "returned with great impressions based on

what she saw." An ethnic Kazakh, Yermukanov expressed interest in U.S. journalism and concern about the decline of Kazakh language, the effect of the Iran-Israel conflict on Kazakhstan, the benefits of WTO accession, and the flooding of Kazakhstan's markets by cheap Chinese goods.

¶19. (SBU) After both sessions, PolOff answered individual questions from audience members. A young North Kazakhstan Oblast representative, Samat Shakanov, asked for a list of companies interested in joint ventures, particularly in wheat-refining, meat production, bio-diesel, and bio-fuels. At the same session, a local North Kazakhstan University graduate complained that he must pirate music and videos due to a lack of jobs in the region for educated young people.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: North Kazakhstan and Kostanai Oblasts are stable regions with residents who are unafraid to speak their views. However, the contrast between the Akimat representative, looking for cooperation to grow the local economy, and the self-proclaimed pirate, who expressed frustration at the lack of opportunity, demonstrates the challenges facing regional administrations. END COMMENT.

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